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ABSTRACT

A 3-year research project commissioned in 1988 investigated Scottish probationer teachers' views of five aspects of their experience: initial training, recruitment and selection, induction, support, and assessment. Interviews and questionnaires were used to collect the views of 250 probationer teachers, their headteachers, other school staff, local authority staff, teacher trainers, and the General Teaching Council. End-of-course student profiles and interim and final reports on probationers were also analyzed. The research identified three major areas for action: the improvement of continuity between training and early experience in a teaching post; the clarification of roles and functions of those involved with probation; and the provision of timely information and useful feedback to enhance induction and professional development. It is concluded that what is needed by probationer teachers includes: enough information on policies and procedures to avoid serious early mistakes; help in becoming acquainted with staff and the community context; basic provision of resources; opportunities for feedback and staff development; and support from staff who have been briefed in the likely needs of probationers. (JDD)

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THE SCOTTISH OFFICE
Education Department

INTERCHANGE

No 14

A Study of Probationer Teachers

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A Study of Probationer Teachers

Janet Draper, Helen Fraser and Warwick Taylor

Moray House Institute of Education, Heriot-Watt University

A teacher's period as a probationer is more than just another hurdle in the process of becoming fully registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. It is a starting point in a relationship with employers; it realigns expectations about teaching, schools and school management; it is an introduction to continuing professional development; it transmits messages about a person's quality of teaching and consequently helps to build confidence and self-esteem. However, the priority given to probation at regional and school level does not always reflect its central importance in influencing the future characteristics of the profession and the quality of pupil learning. In 1988 the Scottish Office Education Department commissioned a three year research project, based at Moray House Institute of Education, which investigated probationers' views of five aspects of their experience: initial training, recruitment and selection, induction, support and assessment.

Research methods

The probationary period has more than one function: a time of testing; the beginning of career long professional development...

What assumptions underlie the provision made for beginning teachers?

Interviews and questionnaires were used to collect the views of a sample of 250 probationer teachers (reflecting proportions of teachers trained in different institutions and employed within regions across Scotland), of their headteachers and other school staff, of local authority staff with responsibility for probationers, of staff involved in the training of teachers and of the General Teaching Council (GTC). End-of-course student profiles and interim and final reports on probationers submitted to the GTC were also analysed. Information from the probationers formed the core of the project and this was collected at the middle and end of the first and second years of teaching. The questionnaires were based on issues arising from the interviews, from the project brief and from the literature.

Experiences of probation

The evidence from this research project suggested that some probationer teachers felt that they had been appropriately trained,

carefully recruited, well inducted, adequately supported and professionally assessed so that they valued and respected the profession they entered on full registration. Unfortunately, this was not the case for all new teachers. Some felt poorly prepared by their initial training for aspects of their job. Some were unclear about why they were selected for their posts. Many went through a process which offered little in the way of induction and support, with no attempt made to identify or meet their needs as developing teachers. When final registration was complete after two years of teaching over one third of probationers felt that the assessment of their performance was based on inadequate and inappropriate procedures which left them with the impression that their skill and competence as teachers had not been tested or recognised. They saw full acceptance into the profession not so much as a process of careful scrutiny and critical peer evaluation but rather one of chance. In addition, probation was frequently felt to be a period of proving competence rather than one of professional development.

It should be noted that although a two year period of continuous experience in one school is the typical expectation of the probationary period, this was not the case for all. One fifth of the primary school teachers and more than a quarter of the secondary teachers taught in more than two schools over two sessions. A considerable number indeed worked to short-term contracts and intermittent employment with diffuse and erratic support and assessment of their progress.

Areas for action

Many probationers are not confident that they are experiencing a planned, coherent introduction to teaching.

How might those who manage probation improve continuity, clarity of roles and functions and the communication of information and feedback?

The research identified three major areas for action:

- the improvement of **continuity** between training and early experience in a teaching post;
- the clarification of **roles and functions** of all those involved with probation.
- the provision of timely **information** and useful **feedback** to enhance induction and professional development.

Continuity

In a learning process as complex as that faced by the new teacher it is not surprising that a major issue arising from the study was continuity between training and the probationary period. A smooth start into post has clear benefits for the learning experiences of the pupils for whom new teachers find themselves responsible.

Clear statements about specific aspects of initial training are difficult to establish because probationers' views on training were very varied. Furthermore, the project was not intended to offer a full evaluation of initial training. However, some broad generalisations about satisfaction with initial training can be made.

Headteachers were more satisfied overall with initial training than probationers (with around 10% reporting dissatisfaction compared with about a quarter of probationers), and BEd-trained probationers were more satisfied than PGCE-trained probationers. This overall measure of satisfaction suggested that PGCE-trained primary probationers were the least satisfied. However, it was the secondary probationers who were the most critical of training in terms of how well they had been prepared for aspects of the job. Probationers and others were more confident about training aimed directly at the teaching of pupils (for example, planning, teaching methods) and were less confident about training for the wider aspects of the teaching role and for long term involvement with classes.

Achieving continuity cannot be easy, since the move from training to full time responsibility for a class will inevitably be discontinuous. Ideally, however, the period in first post, despite the increased demands of the new role, will be a carefully planned development from the end of initial training, with all that that implies for induction and support.

Curiously, weaknesses that probationers perceived in their training did not directly predict their subsequent problems. For example, BEd-trained primary probationers most commonly thought that they were not well prepared for aspects of administration, but they did not report this as a problem once in post. It may be optimistic to expect continuity to be achieved between training and the first teaching post, given the variation between schools in practice, policies and context. There is also the effect of contractual issues, in that those who began their teaching career in full time permanent posts were far more likely to experience continuity than those employed on short term temporary or supply contracts.

Authorities, schools and colleges are committed to a partnership in the initial training of teachers and its resulting end-of-course profile.

How far should this profile be seen as a starting point for effective early induction and support?

Some probationers did experience good continuity as they moved from training into teaching jobs: there were some excellent examples of good thoughtful practice in regions and schools. However, half of them criticised the selection process that they experienced as not sympathetic to their needs either as candidates or as new appointees. In many cases they were not given the courtesy of information about selection procedures, on what criteria would operate, on the functions of interviews or the training profile. Induction in the first days and weeks frequently lacked forethought at both regional and school levels.

Probationers reported being particularly surprised by the amount of responsibility they now had as teachers. While everyone beginning a new job expects new challenges, effective induction and support in early probation might alleviate some of the pressures of the transition into post. For example, effective induction is more likely when those supporting new teachers have access to information on end-of-course performance to provide a starting point for future professional development (see Table 1 overleaf).

Table 1. Headteachers' use of end-of-course profiles for probationer teachers

	% of headteachers: Primary (n=148)	Secondary (n=147)
Received end-of-course profiles of probationer teachers	18	30
Used profiles for purposes other than selection	6	6

'[It was] just a case of come on the day and find out. Worrying in the summer about not having a timetable or which books you'd be using'

What procedures and people might authorities and schools have in place to make for a smoother start in those first few weeks in post?

It is clear then that discontinuities do arise and questions can be asked about:

- the extent to which the partnership between colleges and schools in training can help to structure the transition into first post.
- the extent to which the profile at the end of training is used in selection to enhance continuity and match the person to the job;
- the quality and perceived fairness of the whole selection process and its potential for induction;
- the quality of experience of new teachers on supply or short term contracts for whom there can be several new starts;
- the opportunities in school to develop the skills of self-evaluation and reflection central to current training;
- how to take account of what probationers find problematic in their teaching post, rather than what they perceive as inadequate in their training.

Roles and functions

The clarification of roles and functions is an area which this research highlighted as a focus for concern at both regional and school levels. Systems can fail — even where roles are apparently well defined and there are good intentions to achieve the kind of practice which supports the new teacher. Where roles have not been well defined it is inevitable that probationers do not get the support they deserve and need. At school level, for example, the study revealed a lack of shared understanding between headteachers and probationers about the provision of support (Table 2).

Among those involved in teacher education there has come to be a fairly widely held belief that the training of teachers should involve partnership between schools and colleges. The project data showed that some probationers and headteachers still saw the colleges as solely responsible for training. The view was not confined to pre-service training. The experience of many probationers suggested

that some school staff did not see themselves as having a part to play in the continuing training and development of new teachers.

Table 2. Views of headteachers and probationer teachers about provision of support

Has a member of staff been designated probationer support person?	% answering 'yes'	
	Headteachers	Probationers
Primary school	88 (n = 114)	28 (n = 101)
Secondary school	96 (n = 105)	42 (n = 90)

Later experiences in first post fell similarly short in many cases and the research highlighted a number of other issues:

- although some schools pay particular attention to the early days and weeks of induction, providing teachers with both written and personal support, this situation is not the norm;
- probationers reported that the best situations were those where schools offered clearly structured support, coupled with flexibility, warmth and awareness of individual needs;
- probationers were generally satisfied with the quality of professional relationships but only half of them were satisfied with the level of support they received;
- the relationship between support and assessment needs to be clarified, with more recognition of the formative value of assessment;
- the skills of school management teams in handling people are crucial in creating and sustaining a supportive environment;
- probationers particularly appreciated opportunities to meet with other probationers, both socially and professionally;
- probationers valued good support from both schools and regions, but co-ordination of these is important.

Some probationers and headteachers still saw the colleges as solely responsible for training.

How can schools develop and continue their training role as probationers move into their first post?

Information and feedback

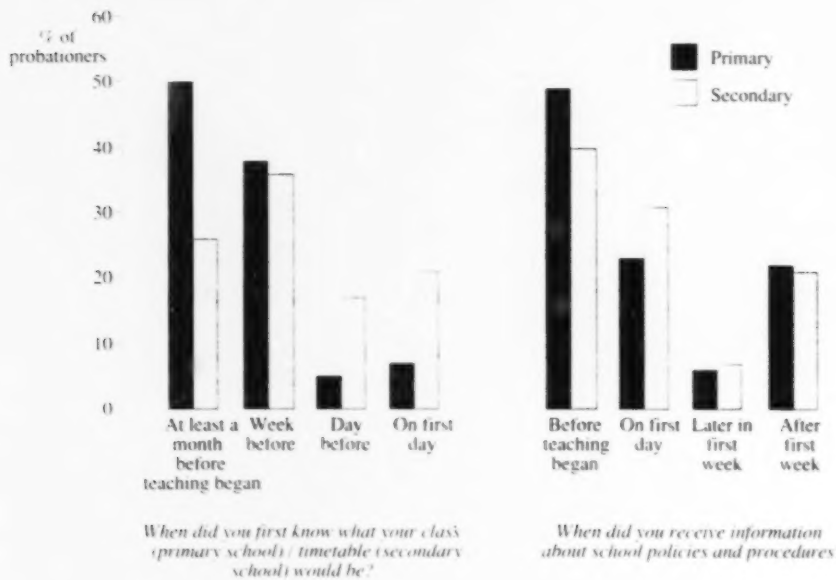
Continuity of experience is closely related to the provision of information and the quality of feedback on their teaching given to those who are learning to teach.

> *'Some things I felt I didn't know what was expected of me. People doing it for years assume you know. I don't want to keep asking. I would have liked a structured programme...someone to forestall my questions, know what I would need to ask'*

In addition, last minute appointments resulted in the absence of both important information and time to prepare.

'I knew I'd got the job at 3pm. I started the next day' — summarises an experience which is not uncommon and one which makes it difficult for a new teacher to achieve a professional level of planning for teaching (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Information received by probationer teachers about their first post in school



Short notice was only the first problem for some probationers who then found themselves without even the support of materials or policies which already existed in the school.

There is a need for well prepared and thoughtfully delivered information — and not only at the point of recruitment and selection or in the first few days of teaching and the induction period. A key factor in achieving early success — success which is crucial to the confidence necessary for effective teaching — is knowing how a particular school works in terms of its policies and, even more importantly, its procedures. If new teachers (whether experienced or not) do not know enough about how the school works and what precedents have been set in the past then they learn by making mistakes, often very public ones. Clearly new teachers do not wish to be bombarded with information. A carefully planned induction to each individual school, sensitively developed, could equip new staff to avoid some early disasters.

'Feedback was rare and when given was in the nature of a casual comment in passing'

Is it possible to identify criteria for ongoing assessment and means of collecting evidence which can give a stronger foundation for regular feedback on progress?

New teachers also need feedback about their progress as part of their professional development. Such feedback should be based on criteria understood by all those involved and it should be possible to demonstrate how the evidence collected relates to the chosen criteria.

Many new teachers were unclear about what they had to do to be seen to do well. Not only do they need to know about their jobs and how they are progressing, they also need to know how the teaching system develops and justifies its procedures, and how it provides for the future development and career prospects of its new members.

> *'I feel I haven't been assessed really therefore my teaching isn't as good as it should be'.*

That probationers lacked feedback is shown by the number who were surprised (usually pleasantly) by the content of reports written for submission to the GTC (Table 3):

Table 3. Reactions of probationer teachers to the interim and final reports written for submission to the GTC

		% of probationers	
Has your view of yourself as a teacher changed as a result of your report?		Primary	Secondary
		(n=114)	(n=112)
Interim report:	Yes	40	31
	No	60	69
		(n=113)	(n=101)
Final report:	Yes	40	30
	No	60	70

NB: Reports are submitted to the GTC at one or more at points during probation and at the end of probation.

Interviews with regional personnel and headteachers as well as probationers showed they were all short of important information at key points. Flow of information and good feedback were seen to be important so that:

- at the recruitment and selection stages end-of-course information can be timed to articulate with regional interviews;
- newly appointed teachers can have knowledge of particular classes and relevant school policies and procedures, such as those on control and discipline, early enough to avoid mistakes;
- headteachers are fully involved in the selection process and receive information on selection, profiles and individual strengths (see table);
- headteachers have a good foundation on which to build a programme of induction and support;
- in the whole process of learning to teach, teachers know what they need to do in order to improve their teaching.
- new teachers can continue to develop their professional skills.

Good practice in the management of probation involves a developmental perspective.

How can the training aspect of these two years be enhanced to emphasise their importance as a learning period and an integral part of the process of developing as a teacher?

Summary

It is clear from the research evidence that some probationers have a better start than others. It is also clear that what probationers seek in support is often not intrinsically different from what is needed by any new teacher in a school:

- enough information on policies and procedures to avoid serious early mistakes;
- help to become acquainted with staff and the community context;
- basic provision of resources;
- opportunities for feedback and for staff development; and
- support from staff who are briefed in the likely needs of probationers.

Do probationers have needs beyond those of the experienced new teacher? The findings of this research suggest that they do. In their first post teachers have no past experience on which to draw, to know what questions to ask and of whom, and to identify what help to seek and from whom. The probationer teacher has no personal bank of resources from previous work, is less likely to have a clear sense of the impact of being solely responsible for the learning of a group of pupils and has initially little grasp of the reality of coping with the job in the long term.

Eighty-five per cent of headteachers with probationers on their staff reported that the benefits of having them outweighed the disadvantages. However, the number of probationer teachers who were dissatisfied gives cause for concern. Some felt undervalued and overlooked and even those who were manifestly doing well had often not been told so.

However, most were enjoying being teachers. The job was proving to be stimulating and worthwhile. Those who had completed their probation were already looking ahead to future career possibilities. Most expected still to be in teaching in five years time. If this is the case when many are seen to have such a poor start, the profession should be asking what might be achieved by good continuity, planned induction, appropriate support, useful feedback and effective assessment.

Full report of the project

The full report of the project, ***A Study of Probationers***, by Janet Draper, Helen Fraser, David Smith and Warwick Taylor is available from the authors, price £12.00 at Moray House Institute of Education, Heriot-Watt University, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.

Notes

Provision for beginning teachers

Improving continuity, clarity of roles and information/feedback

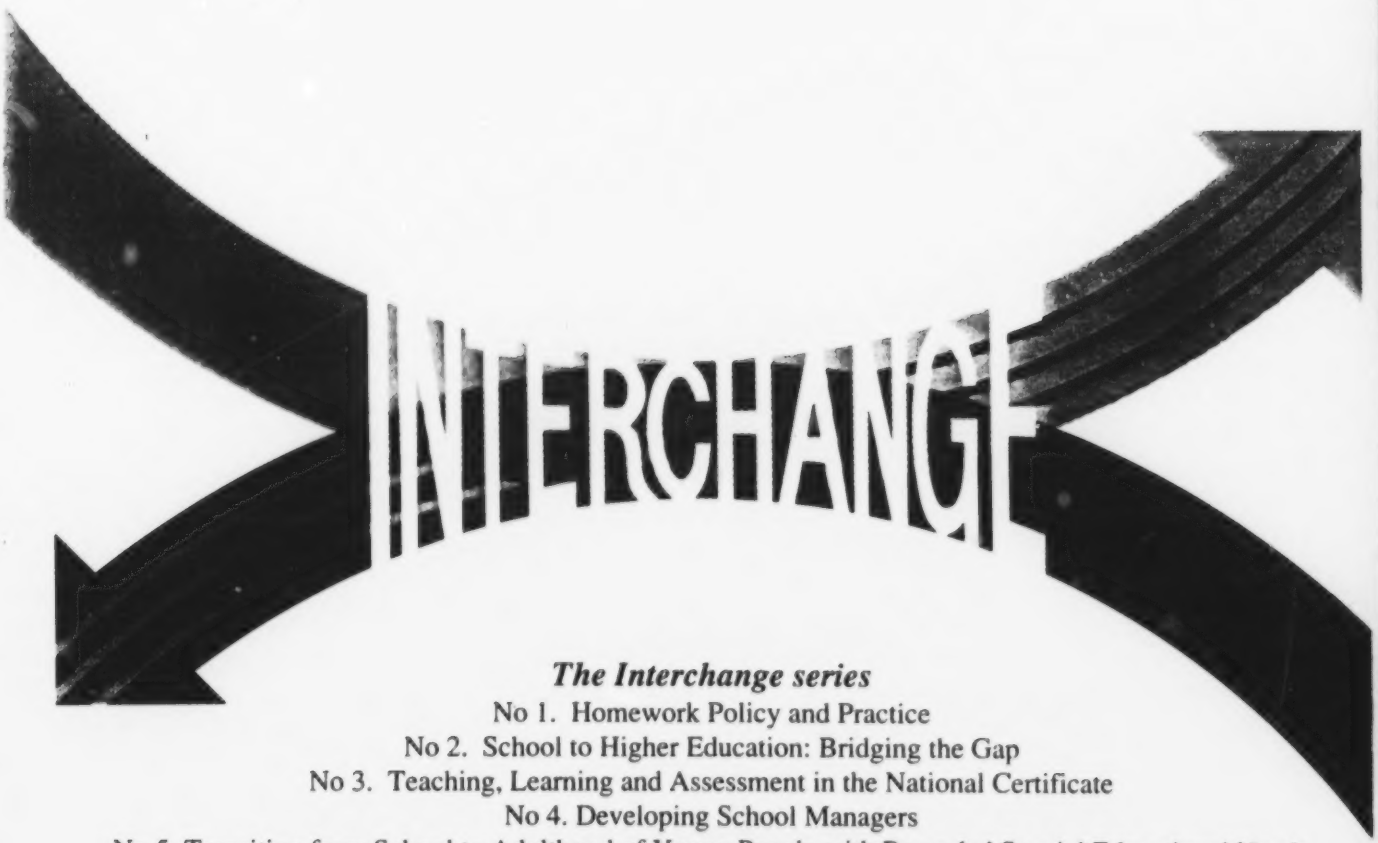
End-of-course profiles in induction and support

Helping teachers in their first few weeks in post

Developing and continuing training role of colleges

Assessment and feedback on progress

Enhanced training during probation



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